

Editorial

Body art in Hong Kong: further studies needed

Body art or tattooing is not a new entity. There is archaeological evidence of body art in Neolithic sites and tattooed skin has been found dating as far back as around 3000 BC. In Hong Kong, body art was prevalent among servicemen and sailors stationed in Hong Kong after World War II. Over the decades, the public perception of body art/tattoo has evolved from the negative, rebellious image, being associated with crime during the seventies and eighties, to the currently more artistic perception of the practice.

There have been studies on the attitudes of college students on body art. In a study of 595 college students, Owen et al reported that the self-identity effects of body art were to aid self-expression, to be oneself and to be unique.¹ A higher number (greater than four) of body art parts/piercings was found to be associated with high-risk behaviour and emotional distress.² On the other hand, there was no difference in terms of well-being between those with one to three tattoos and their non-body art peers. There have also been reports of an association between tattooing and sexual activity at an earlier age.²

How prevalent is body art in Hong Kong? There are no formal statistics on this. In this issue, Yau et al provide some information on body art in Hong Kong. Through a questionnaire survey of students studying medical and health sciences, we obtain an idea of the attitudes and the reasons for body art in this population. Their findings showed that the most common

reasons for body art in this cohort were to be individualistic. This reflects an individualistic, independent mindset that is common among the younger generation. Although these findings are from a selected cohort of those with body art, it does give some insight into the current situation in Hong Kong. In this study, as these were students of the medical sciences faculty, most were aware of the risks of infections such as HIV and hepatitis B or C. However, the study found that many (66.5%) would choose to remove the body art if they were not happy with it, implying that they were not aware that body art may not be completely removable. Given that these were students of the medical sciences who possessed a higher level of medical knowledge, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the average non-medical population would be even less likely to be aware of these aspects of body art.

In this medical science student cohort who were conscious of the importance of hygiene, the most common venue for obtaining body art was the professional body art shop. Yet would this be true for all those who choose to undergo body art? It is perfectly possible that body art continues to be practiced in venues where hygiene is substandard with its inherent risks. We do not know the true situation yet. Compared to the West, data on the true prevalence, the prevalence of complications and after-effects of body art in Hong Kong are few. Further study into the actual situation are therefore important in order to prevent the transmission of infections and other complications. With the changing social

perceptions of body art and it being more commonplace, this will become increasingly important.

As medical practitioners, we are in a position to advise on the risks and consequences of body art. In practice, we are most likely be requested for management the consequences of body art such as to remove a tattoo or treat complications such as scarring or contact dermatitis. Therefore, as body art is becoming more common, more information concerning its risks and importance of hygiene conditions during the body art process should be

available, after which one can make one's decision whether or not to have body art.

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References

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2. Koch JR, Roberts AE, Armstrong ML, Owen DC. College students, tattoos, and sexual activity. *Psychol Rep* 2005;97: 887-90.